

What has happened to the extreme right in Britain?

Anthony HEATH

Nuffield College, University of Oxford

I. Introduction

In Britain, the extreme right parties have had relatively little electoral success throughout the twentieth century. Candidates from the succession of extreme right parties such as the British Union of Fascists, the League of Empire Loyalists, the National Front and the British National Party have almost invariably lost their deposits in the seats which they have contested in General Elections (although they have done rather better in by-elections), and they have never actually won a seat in Parliament.

As in other countries, support for the extreme right has been rather volatile, following a cyclical pattern. In Britain their best recent showings were in 1970, when the National Front obtained on average 3.6% of the vote in the 10 constituencies which it fought, and in February 1974 when it obtained 3.2% of the vote in the 54 constituencies which it contested¹. Since then the National Front and its successor, the British National Party, have been negligible political forces, and there has not been in Britain an upsurge in voting for the extreme right comparable to the rise of the Republicans in Germany², of the Front National in France³, or of the Vlaams Blok in Belgium⁴. There have however been some successes in local elections, most recently in September 1993 in the Isle of Dogs in London's East End when the BNP won a by-election.

Such traditions of support for the extreme right as do exist in Britain occur in deprived urban centres. The East End of London with its mixture of urban deprivation and successive waves of immigration has been a particular source of support⁵. There are no good grounds for supposing that these problems of urban deprivation and ethnic conflict have ameliorated over the last twenty years, and therefore we might do well to consider **political** rather than social explanations for the current weakness of the extreme right in Britain⁶.

1 ANWAR M., (1986) *Race and Politics: Ethnic Minorities and the British Political System*, ch. 8. London: Tavistock.

2 WESTLE B. and NIEDERMAYER O., (1992) 'Contemporary right-wing extremism in West Germany: the republicans and their electorate'. *EJPR* 22: 83-100.

3 MAYER N. and PERRINEAU P., (1992) 'Why do they vote for Le Pen?' *EJPR* 22: 123-141.

4 SWYNGEDOUW M., (1992) 'The breakthrough of the extreme right in Flanders', *Regional Politics and Policy* 2: 62-75.

5 HUSBANDS C.T., (1983) *Racial Exclusionism and the City: the Urban Support of the National Front*. London: Allen and Unwin.

6 STUDLAR D.T., (1974) 'British public opinion, colour issues and Enoch Powell: a longitudinal analysis', *BJPS* 4: 371-381.

Before turning to the explanations for the weakness of the extreme right in Britain, we begin with a check on the characteristics of NF support in Britain. We have to use 1979 data ⁷, since the subsequent lack of electoral success of the NF has led to their neglect in national surveys. However, the aggregate data (ie the pattern of support by constituency or ward) give good reason to think that little has changed since 1979. Moreover, the 1979 data have not been analysed from this point of view before, and so they can further our understanding of the extreme right in Britain.

In analysing the social and attitudinal profile of NF supporters in Britain and their successors today in the BNP, we need to distinguish between what might be called the core and the periphery. In our data we can distinguish between, on the one hand, the people who were positively favourable towards the NF and who might be expected to vote for the NF if there were a candidate; and, on the other hand, those people who, while not positively favourable, were not actually against the NF ⁸. There were 2% of the former but 14% of the latter in 1979.

The latter were people who might conceivably join a NF bandwagon were it ever to roll. However, the core is more interesting and perhaps more important since, without a core, no bandwagon is going to roll.

II. The core NF supporters

Previous research on support for the National Front in Britain has suggested that supporters differ little from the electorate as a whole ⁹ ¹⁰. Researchers in the past have found few characteristics that distinguished NF supporters from the remainder of the electorate, and have concluded that the NF lacked the distinctive social profile of Labour or Conservative supporters. However, when we study the core NF supporters, we find that they are not perhaps quite as nondescript as previous writers have suggested.

As table 1 shows, the positive supporters of the National Front were in some respects very like Labour supporters - they tended to be unqualified, unlikely to own their own homes, were non-religious and were far from affluent. But they were also quite unlike Labour supporters, and almost identical to Conservatives in that they identified with the middle class rather than with the working class, and were not union members. Table 1 gives the details ¹¹.

⁷ The data come from the 1979 BES, conducted by CREWE, SARLVIK and ROBERTSON. We are grateful to the ESRC Data Archive for supplying these data. The usual disclaimers apply.

⁸ We have distinguished the core from a question (M000171) which asked respondents what mark out of ten they would give the NF. Scores of 6 and above were counted as positive supporters of the NF. Similar questions were asked about the other parties, and scores of 6 or above for a given party tended to be associated with relatively high probabilities of voting for that party. We then used a second question to distinguish the periphery. Respondents were asked whether they were very strongly against or not very strongly against the NF (M000164). Respondents who were not very strongly against the NF and who also gave a mark greater than zero but less than six were assigned to this category.

⁹ HARROP M., ENGLAND J. and HUSBANDS C.T., (1980) 'The bases of National Front support', *Political Studies* 28: 271-83.

¹⁰ HUSBANDS a.c., 1983.

TABLE 1

Social characteristics of party supporters

	Conser- vative	Labour	Liberal	None	NF
% unqualified	49.6	70.1	47.3	48.3	67.5
average weekly income	£78.5	£60.7	£72.1	£68.5	£50.6
% home-owners	70.1	41.3	61.4	50.4	35.0
% non-religious	39.1	53.0	45.9	52.6	65.0
% union members	19.5	41.0	32.9	31.2	22.5
% with middle class identity	48.3	17.1	33.8	24.8	45.0
% 35 and under	29.0	32.0	36.4	43.3	52.5
N (except for income)	685	659	206	229	40

Source: BES 1979

The data of table 1 suggest that, among the positive NF supporters, there is at least as strong a social profile as there is among Labour or Conservative supporters, albeit an incongruent profile. Given the small numbers of NF supporters involved, however, we must test for the statistical significance of these results. In table 2 we use multivariate logistic regression and this confirms our first impressions¹². There are no significant differences between Labour and NF supporters in qualifications, home-ownership or religiosity, but there are large and significant differences from the Conservative supporters in these respects. Conversely, there are no significant differences from Conservative supporters with respect to middle-class identity and union membership, but large and significant differences from Labour identifiers.

11 Conservative, Liberal and Labour supporters are distinguished on the basis of the standard question on party identification. Some positive supporters of the NF identified with one of the three main parties, but these have been included in the NF category in order to make the categories mutually exclusive.

Qualifications are defined as the major school and university qualifications, namely (1) CSE and RSA (together with apprenticeship), (2) School Certificate, GCE O level and Scottish 'lowers', (3) GCE A level and Scottish 'highers', (4) Teacher training and professional qualifications, (5) Degree.

Non-religious people are defined as those who said they had no religion together with people who said that they never attended church.

Income is defined as the usual weekly or monthly income after tax of the individual or, if married, of the household. The income data were collected in bands, and we have to make guesses for the average income of people in the top and bottom bands.

Class identity is measured in subjective, not objective, terms using the standard BES questions.

12 Income was not included in these logistic regressions as there was considerable missing data on the income variable. However, if income is included it proves to have no significant effect net of the other variables in the model. In other words, the low income of the NF supporters can be explained by the other variables in the model such as their age and lack of qualifications.

TABLE 2

Logistic regression of social characteristics

	NF vs Conservative	NF vs Labour	NF vs Liberal
qualified	-.92*	-.12	-1.18**
home-owner	-1.49**	-.39	-1.10**
religious	-1.02**	-.54	-.84*
union member	.14	-.83*	-.28
middle class identity	.50	1.38**	1.08**
aged over 35	-1.15**	-.80*	-.74
model improvement	45.0	30.8	30.1
N	721	696	246

* parameter significant at the .05 level

** parameter significant at the .01 level

So the positive NF supporters appear to be the people "without" -without advantages such as qualifications or home-ownership. But they are also without institutional memberships - they are not members of unions or churches. To a large extent, they appear to be people whom we might expect to vote for the Labour Party, but who are not incorporated into traditional working-class structures. They suffer from a double marginality¹³. We might also speculate that the tribal nature of the football crowd might be one of the few ways in which they might achieve a sense of belonging and incorporation.

In terms of attitudes, what we would expect to find is that, given their economic position, these National Front supporters are not particularly right-wing on the criterion of the usual ideological differences that divide the Labour and Conservative parties (eg the left-right dimension). And given their low educational level, we would expect them to be low in political interest and efficacy but relatively high in authoritarianism. The measures that we have support these expectations.

13 Cfr. WESTLE B. and NIEDERMAYER O, a.c., 1992.

TABLE 3
The political attitudes of party supporters

	Conser- vative	Labour	Liberal	None	NF
redistribution of wealth	+0.48	-0.48	+0.09	+0.09	-0.08
privatisation	+0.49	-0.56	+0.07	+0.02	-0.21
military cuts	+0.30	-0.30	+0.04	-0.11	-0.02
strong leaders	+0.25	-0.20	-0.03	-0.11	-0.18
welfare benefits	+0.35	-0.37	+0.03	0.01	+0.12
death penalty	+0.13	-0.10	-0.06	-0.07	+0.35
equality for blacks	+0.18	-0.11	-0.28	-0.07	+0.83
political interest	+0.15	-0.02	+0.03	-0.36	-0.11
shape the country is in	-0.10	+0.16	-0.01	-0.00	-0.28
N (minimum)	652	607	189	203	36

Table 3 shows the average position of NF supporters on a number of attitudinal items. The relevant questions were asked in the main as 5-point agree/disagree items but a few were 7-point and a few 3-point items. For ease of comparison, we have therefore standardised all the measures to have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one, minus scores indicating a score to the left of centre and positive scores being to the right of centre.

Table 3 demonstrates clearly that the NF supporters were to the left of centre on the items such as privatisation and nationalisation which are central to the left-right dimension in British politics, and they are in these respects closer to Labour than to the Conservatives. They are quite clearly not on the far right in this respect.

Interestingly, the NF were not on the far right with respect to the political system either. The 1979 survey contains the question:

Some people think that changing our whole political system is the only way to solve Britain's problems. Some think the system should be changed to give ordinary people much more say in what goes on. But others think the system should be changed so that the country's political leaders have much more power and authority to get on with the job without interference. Which... comes closest to your view?

Table 3 shows that the Conservatives are the most likely to occupy the traditional authoritarian position, giving political leaders more power and authority, while NF supporters were similar to Labour supporters in preferring ordinary people to be given more say.

The NF supporters were however authoritarian on a number of issues such as the death penalty (although this was perhaps only to be expected given their low levels of education and the well-known correlation between education and authoritarian attitudes).

We also see the low levels of political interest and the pessimism that previous researchers on the National Front have noted. Respondents were asked:

All in all, would you say that the country is in very good shape, fairly good shape, poor shape, or that something is very wrong?

In 1979 Labour was the incumbent government and not surprisingly therefore Labour supporters took the most positive view of the kind of shape the country was in. The Conservative Party on the other hand had campaigned on the poor conditions that Labour had bequeathed the country, with rising unemployment, rising pay demands and industrial action. Their supporters took a poor view of the country's shape, but as we can see the National Front supporters were even more pessimistic than the Conservatives.

Finally, on race we see that the NF supporters were far more hostile to ethnic minorities than were other respondents. Respondents were asked:

And how do you feel about recent attempts to ensure equality for coloured people? Have these gone much too far, a little too far, are about right, not gone far enough, or not gone nearly far enough?

It is on this item above all that the NF supporters stand out as distinctive.

We have to be rather careful here, since it is likely that respondents with low levels of education will be particularly prone to acquiescence bias. That is, less educated respondents may tend to agree with the statements read out by the interviewer, irrespective of the content of the statements. The National Front supporters may therefore show greater levels of apparent racism than they would have done if the question had been phrased differently. Comparisons between National Front supporters and the more highly-educated Liberal supporters may thus be somewhat suspect, but comparisons with Labour supporters should not be affected by this complication, since they have on average similar educational levels to those of the National Front supporters.

If we conduct some logistic regressions analogous to those of table 2 above, we find that the question on race has by far the strongest association with NF support. Once we control for this, scarcely any other attitude plays a major role. The results are shown in table 4.

TABLE 4

Logistic regression of political attitudes

	NF vs Conservative	NF vs Labour	NF vs Liberal
Redistribution of wealth	-0.12	+0.30	-0.99
privatisation	-1.01**	+0.01	+0.21
military cuts	-0.16	+0.07	+0.05
strong leaders	-0.07	+0.04	+0.05
welfare benefits	-0.10	+0.32	+0.34
death penalty	+0.05	+0.08	-0.27
equality for blacks	+0.72*	+0.80**	+1.37**
political interest	-0.11	-0.02	-0.25
shape country is in	-0.10	-0.15	-0.30
model improvement	38.4	39.6	53.4
N	571	514	200

III. The periphery

We turn next to the people who, while not being positively in favour of the National Front, were not strongly against it either. It can be assumed that, when voting for the extreme right in Britain rises above one or two percent, as it does from time to time, it is this group who provide the new recruits.

In table 5 we compare these potential recruits to the NF with the positive National Front supporters on the one hand and with the people who were strongly against the Front on the other hand.

TABLE 5

Social characteristics of opponents and supporters of the National Front

	strongly against NF	not strongly against NF	NF supporters
% unqualified	51.2	58.5	67.5
average weekly income	£73.3	£72.5	£50.6
% home-owners	59.3	50.5	35.0
% non-religious	47.3	50.7	67.5
% union members	31.9	32.1	22.5
% with middle class identity	34.8	29.4	45.0
% aged 35 and under	35.8	34.3	52.5
N (except income)	1314	214	40

Table 5 indicates that these potential recruits to the National Front are in many demographic respects a cross-section of the population. Only with respect to qualifications and to home-ownership did they differ significantly from the people who were strongly against the Front. These results accord fairly closely with those reached by Husbands¹⁴ in his survey of thirteen wards in 1978/9.

14 HUSBANDS C., a.c., 1983, p. 121.

TABLE 6

Political attitudes of opponents and supporters of the National Front

	Strongly against NF	Not strongly against NF	NF supporters
Redistribution of wealth	+0.03	+0.07	-0.08
Privatisation	+0.01	+0.06	-0.21
military cuts	+0.02	-0.02	-0.02
strong leaders	+0.01	-0.01	-0.18
welfare benefits	-0.01	+0.13	+0.12
death penalty	-0.09	+0.27	+0.35
equality for blacks	-0.12	+0.34	+0.83
political interest	+0.12	-0.14	-0.11
shape country is in	+0.03	-0.10	-0.28
N (minimum)	1239	202	36

More differences are evident when we turn to political attitudes. On the main left-right dimension (issues such as the redistribution of wealth and privatisation), these potential recruits are close to the national average. But they are distinctly authoritarian on the death penalty; they have low levels of political interest; are pessimistic about the shape the country is in, and feel that equality for blacks has gone too far. In these respects they have a lot in common with the positive NF supporters.

Results from other countries suggest that, when the extreme right does surge in the polls, it does so by attracting disillusioned voters who are dissatisfied with the main political parties and their performance. Thus, in their study of who voted for Le Pen in France, Mayer and Perrineau (1992) suggested that it was largely a protest vote:

*Overall, the Le Penist vote of 1988 appears not to be a vote for the National Front, nor a vote for its leader, nor a vote for the extreme right. It is more a vote against things; against immigrants and delinquents who are but the scapegoats of their fears, against the political establishment and the parties of government. It is a protest vote, an exutory vote as Jerome Jaffre calls it, more expressive of resentment than instrumental*¹⁵.

Our findings suggest that the same might well prove to be true of Britain. When the BNP won its recent local council by-election in the Isle of Dogs, it was probably a similar protest vote to the French one on which it capitalised.

15 MAYER and PERRINEAU, a.c., 1992, p. 134.

IV. Conclusions

So why is support for the extreme right so low in Britain?

First, we must be quite clear that the National Front (whatever the ideological position of its leadership)¹⁶ did not attract voters who were on the far right of the usual left-right ideological spectrum. Ideologically, it is quite clear that the Conservatives not the National Front attracted the votes of the far right. People who favoured strong defence forces, strong leaders and laissez faire economic policies could and did comfortably vote Conservative under Mrs Thatcher from 1979 onwards. The Conservatives have also had a reputation for being tough on immigration.

Our evidence on Britain suggests that support for the NF is essentially support for racism rather than for any more general right-wing or authoritarian set of policies and programmes. The natural vote for people who were generally right-wing in their political attitudes is a Conservative vote. The far right may actually be quite strong in Britain, but there is little incentive for them to vote for the NF or BNP. The Conservative Party is a far more credible choice.

The low level of support for the NF or its successor the BNP can perhaps be explained in part by its 'single issue' character. While it might be wise to assume that racism itself is probably as widespread in Britain as it is elsewhere in Europe, the conventional left-right dimension continues to be the main source of political division. It is only a tiny minority for whom race is the dominant issue. To be 'successful', therefore, the NF or the BNP would need to broaden their appeals, but their position in ideological space makes this a near-impossible task. Certainly, while Mrs Thatcher was the leader of the Conservatives, they could not hope to compete successfully with her for the ideological far-right vote.

The other major source of support for extremist parties has been voters who are disillusioned with politics and wish to protest against the established parties of both left and right. Again, we would not wish to argue that dissatisfaction is any lower in Britain than it is elsewhere, but rather that the existing political structure has given adequate vent for such protest. Thus, for much of the 70s and 80s in Britain, the protest vote in Britain probably went to the Liberals (and to the Greens in the 1989 Euro-elections when the Liberals were disorganized).

Some evidence for an inverse relation between support for the Liberals and support for the National Front comes from the two elections of 1974. As Anwar has suggested:

...there were 47 seats that the Front fought at both [the February and October 1974] elections, but Liberals 'intervened' in only seven of these.... there was a dramatic collapse of the Front's vote in these seven constituencies, for in October 1974 the number of votes was around two-thirds of the number in February 1974.... the numbers also fell, though slightly and erratically, in the 40 seats that the Liberals contested in both elections.... it did seem that the arrival of a Liberal candidate was detrimental to the Front's performance and the suggestion that the Front picks up 'protest' votes which might otherwise go to the Liberals must be taken seriously¹⁷.

¹⁶ The evidence of the National Front manifestos in 1979 and 1983 suggests that a 'single issue' interpretation might well fit the leadership as well as the supporters.

¹⁷ ANWAR, o.c., 1986, p. 137.

Of course, it is somewhat paradoxical that the Liberals, who were at the opposite end of the libertarian/authoritarian value dimension from the National Front, should have picked up votes from them, but that is the nature of protest votes.

While the suitability of the Liberals as a vehicle for protest may have been true throughout the 1970s and 1980s, this situation cannot be guaranteed to last. As the Liberals become more established (for example, controlling local councils as in Tower Hamlets which contained the Isle of Dogs ward), they too may suffer the disillusion that had previously been the prerogative of the Labour and Conservative parties.

The nature of the Liberal and Conservative parties in the late 70s and 80s may, therefore, help account for the weakness of the extreme right in Britain. Votes which in other countries might have gone to the extreme right had alternative and perhaps more natural alternative destinations in Britain.

At the same time, however, we should also recognize that the British party structure does leave an empty, albeit small, niche which extreme right parties can readily fill. As we have seen, the core supporters of the National Front were people who in many respects might have been expected to vote Labour. They were relatively disadvantaged with little hope of advancement by conventional channels, and it is the Labour Party which has traditionally appealed to such groups. (The Labour Party is for example particularly strong among the unemployed.) At the same time, however, the Labour Party is generally perceived to be egalitarian on race issues and obtains disproportionate support from the ethnic minorities themselves.

More generally, Norris has shown that there is a substantial gulf between Labour politicians and Labour voters on authoritarian issues¹⁸. In this respect the Labour Party is not representative of its voters. There is a tension between the liberal views of Labour leaders and the authoritarian views of some of its working-class voters which extremist parties such as the National Front may always be able to exploit.

Summary: What has happened to the extreme right in Britain?

Support for the extreme right in Britain has been relatively low in Britain in recent years and has not shown the surge apparent in a number of other European countries. The paper uses data from the 1979 British Election survey to examine the characteristics of core and peripheral National Front supporters at the time of their last surge in support, and then goes on to consider why support has remained low in recent years. The 1979 evidence shows that support for the National Front was strongly linked to racist attitudes but in other respects had a 'protest' character. It is suggested that the subsequent weakness of the extreme right in Britain may be due to its single-issue character and to the availability of more attractive alternatives for protest voters such as the Liberal Party.

¹⁸ NORRIS P. (1994) 'Labour party factionalism and extremism'. In A. HEATH, R. JOWELL and J. CURTICE (eds) *Labour's Last Chance?* Aldershot: Dartmouth.